



State of Connecticut  
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Commission on Children



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Senator Musto, Representative Urban and Members of the Committee. My name is Elaine Zimmerman and I am the Executive Director for the Commission on Children. I appreciate the opportunity to testify this morning in support of **Raised Bill 6486, An Act Concerning Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families** and **House Bill 5144, An Act Concerning An Appropriation to Expand the Nurturing Families Network**.

**H.B. 6486, An Act Concerning Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families**

The bill before you seeks to address a systemic problem facing society of fatherlessness. "Fatherlessness" is a complex social issue and there is a great deal of debate about the causes and remedies. However, there is no debate that strong families and communities are essential elements for providing a secure future for children. When both mother and father are positively and actively engaged in a child's life by providing financial support, love, guidance, and discipline, every child has a better chance of success. Within that context, the science of brain development and overall social, emotional and physical health of children depends on the interaction of caring, competent parents and caregivers. Research points to the fact that children with absent fathers are more likely to drop out of school, become teenage parents, develop drug or alcohol problems, or become involved in violent criminal behavior.

The Commission commends the leadership of Representative Morris and Senator LeBeau for convening the Fatherhood Task Force. It has been ten years since Representative John Martinez embraced fatherhood policy for the state and established the Fatherhood Council to bring all three branches of government together to commit to promoting positive fatherhood and better child outcomes. Since then progress has been made in investment in fatherhood programs that provide support, education, job training and parenting classes to dads throughout Connecticut.

The Task Force provides an opportunity to reinvigorate efforts on behalf of families and children. The Task Force heard from parents, child development experts, Judicial Branch leaders, and national experts who provided testimony on the important role of fatherhood. Fatherhood activist and actor icon Bill Cosby provided riveting testimony on the impact of fatherlessness on the minority community. He called for a major culture change to embrace responsible parenting. Too many of our children go to bed without the hug of a father.

The bill before seeks to establish public policies that will promote positive father involvement and address some of the system barriers to achieving this goal.

Section 1: Directs the Chief Court Administrator to establish a Problem Solving Court. This approach authorizes the court to incorporate into court proceedings the ability to work with non-custodial parents, both mothers and fathers, to address the root causes for non-compliance with child support orders. This model, developed by the National Center for Court Innovation, successfully helps parents to address issues such as lack of education, increase parenting skills, work on legal issues, help with co-parenting and overall case management to do what it takes to end the cycle of court involvement. Under the leadership of the Judicial Branch, a committee is now exploring this model and the legislation will provide the necessary legal imprimatur to assist in the establishment of Problem Solving Courts in Connecticut.

The Commission is working with Representative Bruce Morris and the Judicial Branch on substitute language for this section that will clarify that the goal is to authorize the Judicial Branch to establish Problem Solving Court as a system wide practice in dealing with child support cases where these barriers to payment exist.

Section 2: Under the leadership of the 2003 General Assembly, Connecticut instituted an arrears management program and charged the Department of Social Services with promulgating regulations for its implementation. Since its inception, fewer than ten (10) residents have qualified to participate in the arrears management program due to the complicated nature of the eligibility guidelines and administrative procedures.

This section seeks to require DSS to report on its current arrear management program. It also "caps" arrears in excess of five hundred dollars for noncustodial parents living at or below the federal poverty level – a promising practice that evolved in New York.

The Commission would also recommend consideration of requiring the Commissioner of DSS to expand the number of fatherhood programs participating in the arrears management program and to streamline the application and approval process to bring the program closer to its legislative intent.

Section 3b: Requires DSS to report on its efforts to reduce teen fatherhood and the number of noncustodial parents participating in job training and the number becoming employed.

Focusing on prevention is a smart investment and assisting non-custodial parents in securing employment will lead to more stable child support income. Two common-sense measures that begin with asking DSS to report on the current status of these efforts.

Section 3c: Directs DSS to utilize federal funds for these purposes if funds become available.

Clearly, government alone cannot reverse the growing trend of father absence. However, government can enact policies and fund programs that help reduce the number of young men who become teen parents and encourage active participation by fathers of all ages in raising their children. We encourage passage of AAC Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Families as it supports these basic tenets, builds off existing resources and aligns our work the federal "Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Families Act" expected to be reintroduced by the Obama Administration.

#### **H.B. 5144, An Act Concerning An Appropriation to Expand the Nurturing Families Network**

The Commission's work on behalf of children focuses on primary prevention- what does the science of brain development and child youth development research tell us about what children need from birth to age 21 in order to achieve optimal health and development. The Commission has championed legislation to move state budget expenditures from crisis spending to prevention. The bill before you represents a sound investment in primary prevention. The Nurturing Families Network works successfully with families to prevent child abuse and neglect, but does so in a positive framework by providing guidance and training to ensure parents have the skills and knowledge to be competent, caring parents. The Commission support expansion of this program and believes there is a opportunity with the new Obama Administration to claim certain home visitation functions in the Nurturing Families Program in the Medicaid Program. This would provide the necessary funding to expand the program if the dollars were reinvested in this program.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning.



# WHY FOCUS ON FATHERS?

## What Policymakers Should Know

There is no social network where low-income fathers can go for help.

Unlike welfare services for women, there is no single point of access where fathers can obtain services.

Most fatherhood programs exist at the local level through community organizations; few have formal relationships with state institutions.

Most states do not have a statewide strategy regarding low-income fathers.

Children who have access to two parents are at reduced risk for school dropout, teen pregnancy, juvenile delinquency and substance abuse, even if their parents are not married.

Service delivery systems were created for married or divorced families; there is no mechanism to deal with intact families that are not married.

Most low-income fathers are in committed relationships with the mother of their children at the time their child is born.

At birth, many low-income mothers and fathers indicate their interest in marrying.

Most low-income fathers care about their children and want to be involved, and many women want fathers to be involved.

Many low-income fathers grew up without their own fathers; they lack realistic examples of what a father should do and think that if they cannot provide financially, their families are better off without them.

## What Policymakers Can Do

- 4 Use state institutions—child support and welfare agencies and the courts—as access points to connect low-income fathers with services.
- 4 Develop a statewide strategy for service delivery that combines state and local partnerships.
- 4 Develop outcome-based performance measures to assist state agencies to direct efforts toward developing comprehensive fatherhood services.
- 4 Use independent boards or commissions to oversee fatherhood projects.
- 4 Use the budget process to direct money for fatherhood programs administered by an independent board that will solicit proposals from service delivery entities.
- 4 Review policies within the child support and welfare agencies, judicial and educational systems to determine whether laws, regulations and policies deter or prevent father involvement.
- 4 Develop mechanisms that recognize fragile families and provide appropriate intervention.
- 4 Develop flexible service delivery options within welfare and child support agencies that address the needs of different types of families—referral to services, traditional enforcement or diversion.
- 4 Use voluntary paternity establishment to connect low-income fathers and mothers with parenting and child development skill-building activities.
- 4 Ensure relationship building and peer support networks are available to help fathers develop skills that allow them to be better fathers.
- 4 Include mothers in the recruitment process for fatherhood services; they can help reinforce father involvement beyond financial contribution.
- 4 Provide access to mediation and parenting plan development to never-married families similar to the way these services are made available to divorcing parents.

What Policymakers Need to Know and  
What They Can Do

# WHY FOCUS ON FATHERS? (CONTINUED)

Q: Won't providing services to low-income fathers take away from services that help mothers and children?

A: No. Fatherhood services help fathers to be financial providers and help them become better partners and parents. This can benefit mothers and children, particularly as they move off welfare rolls. Many programs can work with mothers and fathers together.

Q: There are lots of fathers out there doing the right thing without any special help. Why should we direct time and money into helping fathers who can't meet their obligations?

A: There are a group of low-income fathers whose partners are making the transition off welfare or could be at risk of going on welfare. These fathers share many of the same characteristics as their female counterparts—low levels of literacy, unemployment, poor work history or low-wage employment. Mothers and children may not receive formal child support from these men because they do not make enough to pay child support. Other times, low-income fathers feel as though they have nothing to offer their children if they cannot provide financially. Through welfare agencies, women and children have access to a variety of programs and services in all parts of a state. However, no formal network exists where fathers can turn for assistance. Helping fathers get jobs can help them reconnect with families; providing peer support networks can help address communication barriers with mothers. Children do better with the involvement of two parents, even if the parents are not married. Developing services to help men be better fathers can provide children with access to parents who work together to raise their children and help ease the hardship many single mothers face.

Q: Why do fathers need help learning how to be a father? They had no problem fathering their child.

A: Many low-income fathers grew up without the presence of their own father, so they lack real-life examples of what a father should do and what he should provide. Many men equate their worth as a father by the financial contribution that they can make. In the eyes of fathers, this notion often is reinforced by the attempt to collect child support in the absence of other types of assistance to help fathers gain access to their children. Helping men feel as though they contribute in a positive way to their families fosters self-esteem, and fathers feel as though they have something to offer their children. Access to other types of services can help fathers develop better communication skills to interact with their partners and skills that help them be better parents.

Q: Won't directing funds to fathers reduce the amount of money that goes to programs that serve mothers and children?

A: No. Under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, states can provide services to both mothers and fathers even if they are not married or do not live together. Welfare caseloads have declined by more than 40 percent nationally, leaving resources that would have been spent on cash assistance available to reinvest in other types of programs or services. Additionally, the new welfare allows states to target resources to poor families—including fathers—to reduce the likelihood that mothers and children will sink deeper into poverty once they leave welfare, or to prevent them from going on welfare in the first place.

# HOW THE CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEM AFFECTS LOW-INCOME FATHERS

## What Policymakers Need to Know

Guidelines formulas that determine child support orders are a matter of state discretion and these guidelines can be formulated in statute.

Not all dads who do not pay child support are deadbeat dads; some fathers lack the financial resources to pay mandated child support amounts.

Low-income fathers face many of the same barriers that welfare mothers face—low literacy, few job skills and poor employment history.

Child support enforcement agencies are traditionally a cost-recovery agency set up to reimburse the state for welfare payments, although fewer than 15 percent of welfare families actually receive support.

Child support agencies were not designed to deal with low-income parents who were never-married.

Most enforcement tools are targeted toward parents with assets and those who have means to provide support but actively evade paying support.

Current child support policy does not have effective mechanisms to distinguish fathers who evade paying support from those who would pay support if they had the resources. No longer is enforcement "one size fits all."

Granting a downward modification to low-income fathers may make it easier for them to make continuous child support payments.

Many fathers do not know they can ask for a modification, or what circumstances warrant a modification

## What Policymakers Can Do

4 Establish formulas and guidelines that take low-income obligors into consideration.

4 Ensure that guidelines allow low-income parents enough income to meet their needs after their child support is paid.

4 Connect fathers with employment and training opportunities that allow them to obtain employment and develop skills that provide wage advancement opportunities, and establish (or modify) realistic support order amounts.

4 Establish child support orders that reflect a father's real income.

4 Include service delivery and referral mechanisms alongside traditional cost-recovery efforts.

4 Create customer service centers within IV-D agencies to allow fathers easier access to information about their case and the child support enforcement process.

4 Devise policies to serve both parents as a family unit regardless of their marital status.

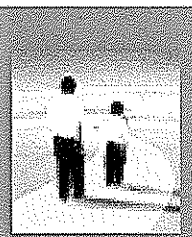
4 Ensure that child support agencies develop partnerships with court systems, welfare agencies and local service providers to assist fathers to meet their financial obligations.

4 Develop procedures to sort deadbeat dads from deadbroke dads and determine whether punitive enforcement, referral to services or modification is the appropriate course of action.

4 Develop customer service lines that can answer basic questions regarding modification procedures.

4 Ensure that fathers are aware that they can ask for a modification if their economic situation changes.

4 Ensure that agencies and courts have procedures to streamline the modification process.



What Policymakers Need to Know and What They Can Do



# HOW THE CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEM AFFECTS LOW-INCOME FATHERS (CONTINUED)

## What Policymakers Need to Know

Many child support orders for low-income men are set as a result of a default order that may not take into consideration the actual wage earnings of a father, resulting in an order that is set too high.

Fathers often receive default orders if they do not attend their court hearing. Fathers avoid these hearings because they are fearful that the child support system's only interest is in punishing them.

Most families who receive welfare do not receive any collected support because the state retains this money to reimburse itself for money spent on welfare. Fathers view this as a disincentive to pay through the system.

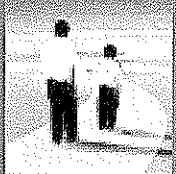
One of the barriers that low-income men face in paying child support orders is the massive arrearages that accumulate once a mother receives welfare.

Many low-income fathers are present at their child's birth and are in a serious relationship with the child's mother.

Women may begin receiving welfare without disclosing the location of the father, though the father may, in fact, be present within the house

## What Policymakers Can Do

- 4 Insist that child support workers establish proactive procedures that encourage fathers to come forward before default orders are entered.
- 4 Provide easy access to information about the child support system that helps both mothers and fathers navigate the court system.
- 4 Inform fathers about their rights and the child support proceeding before their court date to eliminate any misperceptions that could discourage fathers from attending.
- 4 Pass through collected support to families—states can count these expenditures in their maintenance of effort.
- 4 Develop procedures that ensure welfare case-workers adequately communicate the implications of assigning child support rights to the state in exchange for receiving welfare benefits.
- 4 Compromise arrearages for fathers who demonstrate a compliance with payment plans or employment requirements.
- 4 Develop flexible policies regarding the accumulation of interest on past arrearages.
- 4 Require that state agencies set welfare debt equal to the amount of a father's support order.
- 4 Analyze how arrearages are set—retroactive to birth or to the date of a court proceeding—and craft policy that insures a father's debt will be set at an amount he is likely to pay.
- 4 Conduct paternity establishment as early as possible. Suspend enforcement of an order if parents are cohabitating.
- 4 Connect families with services to assist them to develop parenting and relationship skills.
- 4 Conduct outreach to connect fragile families with services before they apply for welfare.
- 4 Connect families with services to assist them to become and stay employed to minimize the use of welfare.



## HOW THE CHILD SUPPORT SYSTEM AFFECTS LOW-INCOME FATHERS (CONTINUED)

- Q: Why should child support enforcement agencies give fathers who don't pay child support "a break" instead of putting them in jail or using other enforcement measures?
- A: Child support agencies should use their enforcement tools for fathers who actively evade child support. For fathers who lack the financial resources to pay support, directing strong enforcement measures does not result in increased child support payments—an ineffective use of state and federal dollars. These policies may well keep fathers from participating in the formalized system. Child support enforcement results in collections for less than 20 percent of poor families. Developing policies that make it more feasible for fathers to pay support can help ensure they will pay continually over time.
- Q: Aren't child support policies set by the federal government, leaving the states with little discretion to decide on alternative policies?
- A: Most child support decisions regarding establishing and modifying orders are a matter of state law or regulation. Federal law sets general guidelines regarding enforcement, but states can use their discretion to decide how orders are set and modified and when they are enforced. State legislatures can affect on these policies by directly putting policy in statute, directing agencies to follow specific guidelines, or developing outcome-based performance measures for agencies to follow.
- Q: What can child support agencies do if they find an obligor who can't pay child support because he is unemployed or underemployed?
- A: Agencies can modify support orders to make the current order more feasible and refer fathers to service providers who can help them find jobs or find better jobs.
- Q: Won't lowering a support payment result in less money for the mother and child?
- A: In most cases the mother and child are not getting *any* support, so applying a downward modification can be an investment in ensuring future payments. It can help to establish a positive relationship between the father and the child support agency.
- Q: Why should a state forgive part of a father's debt—isn't that money he should be obligated to pay?
- A: Depending on the amount of the debt, it may be unrealistic for a low-income father to ever repay massive amounts of past debts—in many cases these amounts are thousands of dollars. Forgiving a portion of arrearages also can help ensure future payments if fathers see repayment as a realistic achievement, reducing the likelihood that fathers will revert to providing "underground support." Given the poor collection rates for this population, states have little to lose by trying a new approach.
- Q: Won't a state be losing money if it forgives child support debt?
- A: States are not collecting large amounts of money on state debt from this population. Essentially, they are spending money on enforcement with little cost benefit. Forgiving some portions of past arrearages may help generate future payments.



# BUILDING SERVICES TO HELP FATHERS

## What Policymakers Need to Know

Low-income fathers share many of the same characteristics as women on welfare—low literacy, poor employment history and low-wage employment.

Low-income men come into contact with many state systems—child support, the courts, corrections and welfare agencies.

Low-income fathers often fall behind in their child support obligations because their earnings are not enough to support themselves and a family.

Many low-income mothers and children do not receive child support.

Federal law requires states to require low-income fathers to work or develop payment plans if they are behind in child support, although many states do not have a statewide strategy to address the issue.

TANF dollars can be used to fund programs and services for fathers without risk to time limits and work requirements for mothers.

TANF dollars can be used to support a variety of services for fathers—employment assistance, counseling, parenting plans, mediation, parenting education, substance abuse and domestic violence.

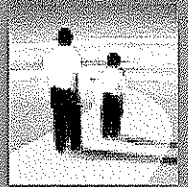
Like welfare recipients, some fathers have barriers—including substance abuse, domestic violence and anger—that hinder their success in the work force.

There is no social network where men can learn about child rearing and building relationships.

Many low-income men grew up without their own fathers; often, they do not know what a real father does or what is expected of him.

## What Policymakers Can Do

- 4 Develop networks of local providers to provide men with employment assistance.
- 4 Use state institutions to refer low-income fathers to local service providers.
- 4 Identify “nontraditional” partners—like voluntary paternity establishment programs, Healthy Start and Head Start—to connect fathers with needed services.
- 4 Connect with fathers through women who are participating in welfare programs.
- 4 Combine traditional cost-recovery efforts in child support enforcement with service referrals to local or community employment providers.
- 4 Inform fathers that they can request a modification of their support order if an order is set too high for them to pay.
- 4 Give judges the option of referring fathers to services instead of jail if they are behind in child support due to unemployment.
- 4 Develop a statewide policy regarding strategies to assist low-income fathers and their families.
- 4 Use the budget process to direct funding for the development of fatherhood programs and services.
- 4 Use TANF funds to make competitive grants to local programs that operate fatherhood programs.
- 4 Direct agencies to use TANF funds to assist fathers.
- 4 Use employment as the catalyst to get fathers involved with programs, but offer other types of services—like peer support, counseling, anger management and parenting—that help fathers develop skills to keep jobs and build relationships with their families.
- 4 Ensure that programs offering peer support services are among the choices offered in the referral process.
- 4 Provide parenting and relationship building education components when requiring work and child support compliance.



What Policymakers Need to Know and  
What They Can Do



## BUILDING SERVICES TO HELP FATHERS (CONTINUED)

**Q:** Why should child support agencies be involved with providing services to fathers? Isn't their primary responsibility to collect support for mothers?

**A:** Child support agencies do try to collect support on behalf of mothers and children, but collection rates are low for poor families. Child support agencies do not need to be the service provider for fathers, but they can act as an access point to connect fathers with services that will help them get jobs so they can pay child support. Not only will it help child support agencies meet their goals of helping families, it is a federal requirement that they have procedures to help low-income fathers work if they are behind in their child support.

**Q:** What kind of services do low-income fathers need?

**A:** Fathers need help finding jobs and developing skills that help them get better jobs. They also need help to make sure their child support orders are set at levels they can afford to pay. Fathers also need peer support to help them deal with their frustration over relationships or low self-worth at not being able to provide for their children. Services that help with anger management and developing parenting plans with their current or former partners also are beneficial.

**Q:** Won't providing services to low-income fathers take away from services that help mothers and children?

**A:** No. Fatherhood services help fathers to be financial providers and help them become better partners and parents, which can benefit mothers and children—particularly as they move off of welfare rolls. Many programs can work with mothers and fathers together.

**Q:** Why do low-income fathers need specialized services?

**A:** Through welfare agencies, women and children have access to a variety of programs and services in all parts of a state. However, no formal network exists where fathers can turn for assistance. Helping fathers get jobs can help them reconnect with families, and providing peer support networks can help address communication barriers with mothers. Children do better with the involvement of two parents, even if parents are not married. Developing services to help men be better fathers can provide children with access to parents who work together to raise their children.

**Q:** How can employment assistance help men be better fathers?

**A:** Many fatherhood programs offer employment services in tandem with other things like peer support, anger management and relationship building skills. Helping men feel as though they contribute in a positive way to their families fosters self-esteem, and fathers feel as though they have something to offer their children. Access to other types of services can help fathers develop better communication skills to interact with their partners and skills that help them know how to be better parents.